Indian Writers Series

Kishori Charan Das

Stories







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Indian Writers Series

Kishori Charan Das (1924-) was born and educated at Cuttack and Patna. Besides twenty collections of short stories, he has written six novels, two volumes of poetry, and several books of essays. He has received the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award (1976), the National Sahitya Akademi Award (1976), the Sarala Award (1985) and the Vishuv Award (1992). Among his works available in English translation are *Death of an Indian* (1984), *Wild Peacock and Other Stories* (1985), *The Prayer Room and Other Stories* (1993), *The Midnight Sun and Other Stories* (1993) and *The Journey* (2000).

Paul St-Pierre, Leelawati Mohapatra and K K Mohapatra have co-edited *Ants, Ghosts and Whispering Trees: An Anthology of Oriya Short Stories* (HarperCollins India, 2003).

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Stories

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Paul St-Pierre, Leelawati Mohapatra and K K Mohapatra

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The Visitor

Suniti's husband called her from the college in the afternoon. 'You'll have a visitor this evening. Someone from your parent's town.'

Suniti was thrilled. Nobody from home had come in a long time; the last person was her mother during Holi. In fact, she had been so put out that she recently dashed off an angry letter home complaining their indifference.

'Who?' she asked.

'Guess.' Her husband tittered. 'Your Jagudada. Don't you remember him – Uncle Jagadish, the advocate? I've invited him to tea. Rustle up something, but don't take too long. The old man has to catch a train at eight in the evening.' After a slight pause, he added, 'And my dear, I'm afraid I'll be stuck here the whole evening. Staff association meeting, you know; I simply can't skip it. I hope you don't mind; you don't, do you, my pretty little golden girl?'

Golden girl. Her husband's term of endearment. He was so sparing with it that every time he used it Suniti's heart skipped a beat and she felt she was a white mouse or a rabbit – something cuddly, furry, tiny, petite – whose sole desire was to snuggle up to her husband, his protective arms engulfing her completely.

Today, however, it failed to weave its spell. The magic was missing. Jagudada would arrive in the evening,

she groaned.

Jagudada was not actually her uncle. A vague, far-off relation rather; more like a respectable elder in her parents' town. Up until a certain spring evening five years ago, he had been no more important to her than the town hall or the government office or the temple – venerable but distant, and largely irrelevant. Then suddenly out of nowhere, he had entered her life. Like a whirlwind.

What business had he had spying on her, the miserable man? She fell to thinking. Oh, the perverse curiosity of the man! Maybe he simply hadn't been able to resist. All right, but once his prurient interest had been satisfied, why hadn't he made a quiet exit? Why had he lingered there and cleared his mean old throat, the old goat? What on earth had he been doing in the deserted school compound at that late hour, anyway? Gazing at the stars? Never mind, he might have had a thousand damned reasons, but why had he peeped through the window? Oh, the creep, the peeping Tom!

All right, let him come. She steeled herself. She couldn't care less. And she wasn't going to be flustered.

But she continued to feel out of sorts. Jagudada's impending visit made her realize she didn't really deserve her husband's endearments. The golden girl was not really 24-carat gold after all; there was a lot of

dross in the precious metal.

She resolved to keep her spirits up at any cost. She crossed over to the mirror and started combing her hair. Humming a tune, she began to think about her husband. Gradually her spirits revived. Yes, she whispered, oh yes, I'm your pretty little golden girl.

Crooning softly to herself, she set about cooking a few dishes for the visitor. She must take herself in hand, she decided, she mustn't give way. This sinister dark cloud would pass; maybe it would rain a little and the path would become slushy, but pass it would. And she'd be restored to her husband's world – to its cosy reassuring warmth.

The visitor arrived.

She felt a flash of panic when he cleared his throat.

'Ma,' Jagudada greeted her, handing her his walking stick. 'I hope you are fine.'

Suniti nearly screamed. Oh, this odious, this horrible old man! This menacing kindness! Would there ever be a respite from this ogre and his kindness? Kindness, ha! Humbug! Just a façade. Meanness through and through, rather. The low cunning in those old dead-fish eyes, the eyes that had become more and more prying with the years. Not even the tiniest speck of dirt escaped them. And that big booming voice – the voice that hung

in the air instead of dissolving into silence, something that could be measured as if it were concrete, tangible. And that walrus moustache, graying at the ends – wild, ugly. And the white handkerchief jutting carelessly out of his coat pocket like a pencil stub from behind a busy shopkeeper's ear. How awful, this pretence of being so damn absentminded and busy, so busy that he didn't have time to dress properly. On top of everything, that horrible way of clearing his throat, as if he was being compelled to speak only as a matter of grave duty. The crowning glory of course was the supercilious Mahatma-like smile laced with a studied touch of sadness – the sadness of knowing too much. His advanced age, his insidious worldly wisdom, his phony kindness, his utter meanness.

Suniti touched his feet and asked after her parents, his wife and other relations. As she put the things her mother had sent her in the cupboard, the memory of that spring evening when Jagudada's kindness had blighted her happiness flashed through her mind.

Huddled together in a corner of the classroom in the gathering twilight of that wild spring evening, they heard a voice they couldn't immediately place. It sounded like one coming from great heights or great depths, so faint as to make one wonder if there had

been a sound at all. The desperate lovers clung to each other even more tightly, perhaps to wish it away. Then they distinctly heard someone clearing his throat. Their embrace slackened, their eyes went moist with fear.

'Who is it?' Suniti asked, mustering her courage.

'Oh, is that you Suni?' replied an unhurried, gravelly voice. 'Don't be scared, child. It's me – your Jagudada. Come here for a second, will you?'

What could anyone in her place have done? She couldn't blame herself.

'I asked your father to come along,' Jagudada chatted. 'But is he the type to leave home? So many excuses trotted out: the cows will cry; the family deity will starve; the city air isn't agreeable, so on and so forth. One silly excuse after another, by God! I said, come on, old boy, time you saw the world around you. But he being who he is – content with his cows and family deity – why would he listen to me?' He laughed and added, 'Look Suni, I can't stay long. I've an old client to look up before catching the train. A big fish, you know. I won him an important lawsuit last year. Let me see if I can wheedle a donation out of the old stinker for our school library.'

God, what pretence! Suniti fumed. The good Samaritan, the do-gooder, the go-getter, the benefactor,

who must go everywhere, who must worry his head over everything; the whole world is his family; every poor soul owes him a debt! She remembered her own debt – her enormous, excruciating, painful debt. Could she ever repay it? Could she settle it any other way?

She bristled with regrets. Why hadn't she confessed to her father right away and been done with it? Perhaps he would have become angry with her, but so what? She could have got even with him by showing her temper. Maybe she should have seriously considered committing suicide. Her father would have sealed himself in the prayer room for a few days, but in the end the crisis would have blown over and everything would have been all right. Why has she incurred the debt of this cold-blooded, smiling ogre?

'I wish I had known in the morning you'd be here,' she said, hurrying off to set the table.

Jagudada gave a broad grin.

'I'm afraid I couldn't prepare anything special for you', she apologized, serving him water in a silver glass.

She looked after his comforts and listened to his incessant chatter. She hated every minute of it. It was sheer torture. Could she every repay her debt? She cried to herself.

'I can no longer eat as much as I used to,' Jagudada

droned on. 'Getting on in years, you know. But look at me, haven't I kept myself as fit as a fiddle? I take my morning constitutionals religiously, you know. My youngest daughter Tonu, the precious thing, she asks me, daddy, why do you carry a stick, can't you walk without it? I laugh and tell her, no my little one, I've become old, you see. Suni, you ought to see how she shakes with laughter, the tiny mite. She's five, going on six. Her younger brother will be one this December. You haven't seen this little boy of mine, have you?'

No, I haven't, she muttered under her breath. And I don't plan to, for heaven's sake. Don't expect me to get interested in your sickening family life. How could the new aunt let an old lecher like you sleep with her? Didn't she scream out? How could you go and marry a slip of a girl younger than your daughter? Isn't this second marriage of yours perfectly hideous?

'Why don't you have another rasogolla, Jagudada?' she said.

'Don't worry,' he chuckled. 'I'll be coming here quite frequently. You'll be able to stuff me all you want.'

Suniti's heart stopped.

'Now I know why the rasogollas from here are so famous,' he continued. 'Oh yes, that reminds me, Tonu's mother has asked me to bring some home.'

Take them, Suniti wanted to shout, take as many as

you want. If you want, I can send tins of them by post. But please, please don't ever drop in here again, I don't want to see that hideous mug of yours for the rest of my life.

She knew it was a childish wish – childish and meaningless. Even if Jagudada stopped his visits, his sinister shadow would hover over her. This man was supposed to have saved her from the scandal, she groaned.

Her heart pounded as she came out of the classroom. An unknown fear gripped her. Jagudada stared at her pale face, perhaps trying to figure out how far things had gone. She tried to put on an indifferent air, but she knew she wouldn't be able to stand his scrutiny for long. Had he persisted a minute more, she would have burst into sobs, but the astute fellow that he was, he beat her to it. 'Come,' he said, patting her back. 'Let's go, I'll walk you home, I promise I won't breathe a word to your father. Nor to anyone else for that matter.'

She hadn't spurned his offer and snapped back, a fat lot I care. Jagudada, go tell everyone, I haven't done anything wrong. On the contrary, she had clutched at it like someone who was drowning. Thank God for the reprieve, she had thought. She must take this opportunity to think things over, to use her head and

sort things out.

'Who else was in that room?' Jagudada asked. 'Bira Nayak, wasn't it? You see, I know. Well, never mind. I'm not going to tell a soul. You just keep quiet about it, all right? I'll take care of everything.'

Take care of what, Jagudada? She had an urge to shout. What was there to take care of?

'Don't worry,' Jagudada repeated, caressing her shoulder.

She had felt vastly consoled that everything was going to turn out all right in the end – her love, her dream, and her future.

They walked past the old gaunt banyan tree by the school gate, the lovers' messages scribbled on the boundary wall, the tea shop of Mahendra Barik (who used to pinch her cheek when she was a child and tell her, my pet, you will grow into something when you grow up, mark my words), the church with its walls green with moss resounding with the evening bells, the municipal park where roses bloomed all year round, the bathing ghat of Manikama Pond (whenever she was upset as a child she always wanted to drown herself in its blue ice cold water), where a bunch of young loafers sat cackling over something.

No one spoke to her, no one seemed bothered about the incident; it seemed as if the kindhearted Jagudada

had already put in a word to everyone on her behalf; and maybe that was why no one looked accusingly, admonishingly at her.

Finally that inevitable meeting with her father. But before he could say anything, Jagudada volunteered: 'I saw Suni coming back home alone from her friend's place and thought why not walk her home. Have you finished your evening prayers, old boy?'

Her father didn't say anything.

'Have you noticed how thin this young girl has become? Why does she have to study so hard?'

Jagudada finished his tea. Buttoning up his coat, he scanned the room. He seemed to approve of Suniti's success as a housewife – the clean crockery, the spick and span floor, the framed photographs of good old Mahatma Gandhi and Shiva-Parvati.

'Next time I come,' he said, his voice mellow with the pleasure of bestowing a prize upon a promising student, 'I must bring Tonu's mother along. I'm sure she'd love to spend sometime time with you.' Grinning from ear to ear like a long lost friend, he added, 'She looks forward to coming here so much. Do you know why? For silk saris! Of course you get silk saris everywhere, but buying them here is an altogether different experience . . .'

First rasogollas and now silk saris! Suniti braced herself.

'But one thing,' he rattled on. 'I would have to get a similar sari for my eldest daughter Jayanti too. Buying the right kind of saris for both of them can be a tough job, you know. One has got to be so careful. You know why, don't you, Suni? Ha, ha!' He just stopped short of giving her a lewd wink.

Of course she knew why, she knew why only too well. Who else would understand his shameless joy if she didn't? His second wife was as young as his eldest daughter, if not younger, and the large-hearted, the just fellow that he was, he wouldn't like to discriminate between the two when it came to buying even as small a thing as a sari! Did Jagudada ever look in the mirror? Into his inner self, his soul, or whatever it was called? If he didn't, he had better listen to Suniti. She'd tell him: in the light of the day he was a long black coat, a man about town; in the darkness of the night a gross body, an animal; in daylight his social service, his roaring legal practice, at night his insatiable maleness. Oh, so revolting! And his kind detachment which was nothing but his heartlessness, his meanness. To the world at large of course, he was a complete human being, the embodiment of dharma, karma, arth, moksha and what not! But he couldn't have been a creation of God, no,

never! No God would have had the heart to create a man like him. What did he think he was born for – to save the Sunitis of the world?

Suniti simmered. The dark torrents of abuse spewed forth. Now Jagudada, you old goat, don't you gawk at me like that! Don't go on chewing your beastly paan, casting evil glances around my home, my little nest. Don't gloat that all this has been made possible because of your kindness. You had nothing to do with it. I won't let your vile shadow darken the skies of my life. Never, never, never! All right, let's face it: maybe I wouldn't have been able to marry Birabhai, it's just as well that I didn't, that marriage wouldn't have worked out well, the sheer intensity of our love would have put the marriage on the rocks, but you can't denigrate Birabhai, my first love, my prince; oh how noble and sensitive his face was, how I wished he were another Jesus and I crying over his crucifixion! You'd never understand the sublime beauty of our relationship. By the way, what did you think you saw that day when you peeped through the schoolroom window, you old goat?

She felt her confidence rising. She looked at the visitor. How stolidly he sat, the old vulture, patting himself on the back over his success in creating, shaping her world. She would destroy his smugness, she had suffered him enough. She'd show him that she was no

longer indebted to him, that she owed him nothing, that there was nothing she was ashamed of. She'd tell him she cherished the memory of Birabhai, the memory of those beautiful days. How she'd love to see the poor old goat jump out of his skin! By God, she'd love to see that. How the dazed creep's mouth would hang open and he'd wonder what had gotten into this chit of a girl who just the other day . . .

Jagudada's eyes lingered on the basil plant in the courtyard.

'Well, Jagudada, how's Birabhai these days?' Suniti asked.

'Who – Bira? You mean Bira Nayak?' There was a pregnant pause. 'Don't tell me you still remember him.'

He chewed his paan meditatively, smacking his lips. 'Bira Nayak? He took his law degree early this year and joined me as a junior. Not doing too badly, you know . . .'

Suniti was hushed. She had nothing else to ask, she'd had her answer. An intense, aching silence engulfed her – the utter silence of the moment when one saw into the heart of light or the core of an endless desert.

Jagudada rose.

Suniti touched his feet.

Amidst the farewell pleasantries, she heard him say, 'I'll come again. Do you hear me, child? I'll come again.

Maybe next month.'

Like the muffled roar of eternity his voice seemed to flow into her in relentless waves.

Dispossessed

He isn't here, he's gone. But wasn't he here only a moment ago? Didn't he press his face against mine while I caressed his neck, soothing the prickly heat on his shoulder? His damp hair had a mildly pungent odour of perspiration. And how he blinked at me with his sleep-laden eyes! But these people wouldn't believe it. And why would they? After all, they didn't give birth to him!

'Come on, Bhauja,' said Chhabi, the youngest sister-in-law. 'It's almost five. Bhai will be back from the office any moment now.'

Shaken out of her trance, Nirmala abruptly sat up on the bed. 'So what?' she snapped. 'What do you expect me to do?'

Chhabi remained silent.

Perhaps it's Chhabi's turn this afternoon to see I have my tea. Oh, these people! Such a silly lot! Or are they a damn sight too clever for me? This Chhabi, this chit of a sister-in-law is perhaps one of them. I can already feel her prying gaze shooting its probing needles into my skin. Now she will go and regale them with her stories: you know what, Bhauja slept like this, she stared at me like that, she said this, she said that, she's growing a horn on her head, yes, I saw it with my own eyes, and she wouldn't touch the tea until I begged and begged her on my bended knees. Oh, my God, how she will

gloat! Then they will descend on me, one by one, the whole lot, from the oldest to the youngest, every one of them. They will paw and pat me, sniffle, and vie with each other to parade their sympathy. Who cares for their sympathy, ha! My son's gone. What do I care for their sympathy?

She smiled bitterly and burst into a flood of tears. Hiding her face between her upraised knees, she tried to stifle her sobs. No, she decided, I'll stop making a spectacle of myself. In fact, I should join them – giggle and gossip, bake cakes and peel vegetables, and . . . Listen, can't any of you bring my son back just once? Just one more time. Just for two minutes. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take a good long look at him and maybe talk to him a little. Then I'll wipe the sweat off his forehead. Am I asking for too much? I'm not asking for the moon, am I? Won't he come to me once more? Just once. Why not? What sin have I committed?

A disconsolate Nirmala raised her head and found Chhabi waiting for her response. 'Still here?' she asked weakly. 'What for?'

Chhabi quietly left the room. The tea had gone cold. Whose turn next to pester the life out of me? Nirmala wondered. Would it be the old servant or the brother-in-law? Or the mother-in-law herself?

Umesh beat them to it. He stole in softly, glanced at his wife and hurried to change his clothes. Pretending to be oppressed by the heat, he looked up at the ceiling to see if the fan was moving at full speed. Then he desperately looked around to fasten his attention on something, anything, no matter how trivial, as though his whole life depended on it. His furrowed brows and sagging cheeks conveyed the unmistakable impression he had reached the end of his tether. There was a limit to what a man could take, he thought, he was just a creature of flesh and blood, not an epitome of endurance.

Nirmala stared vacantly at her husband. She had no urge to speak to him. I know this man, she mused. He's my husband. I don't need to arrange my crumpled sari and look nice. His presence makes no difference to me, it just doesn't. It brings no solace, no balm to my aching heart. Look how he's peeling off his clothes and sighing! Oh, poor husbands – well, what else can they do?

Umesh stood directly under the fan, drying himself. 'Hasn't the tea gone cold?' he asked.

She did not respond.

He sat down beside her. 'Shall I ask for some more?' he enquired rather timidly.

She shot him a scalding glance. Her moist eyes sparked fire. 'Tea! Tea! Tea!' she exploded. 'No one in this house seems to bother about anything else! For heaven's sake,

why can't you people leave a person alone?'

For a moment it seemed he would throw his patience to the winds and take her on. But he knitted his brows and clamped his lips shut. We are passengers on the same boat of grief, he mused, victims of a common tragedy. Why doesn't Nimu realize she isn't alone? How long can she go on like this? Little Biju was my son too, dammit. Everyone said we had the same complexion, the same nose and the same dark brown hair. Had he lived long enough, we would have gone out on walks, played football and chatted about a whole host of things. Maybe he would have hurt himself playing. Then I would have sat with him, cheering him up with stories. Another time he'd have done something naughty, and I'd have given him a box on the ear. The little imp would have scampered off to his mother, wailing and seeking consolation. Oh, my son, why did you have to die!

Billowing in the breeze, the ends of Nirmala's sari brushed gently against Umesh.

This proximity, this physical presence. Nirmala sensed even his sighs kept pace with hers. It irritated her – this petty, superficial harmony.

'Aren't we supposed to go shopping this evening?' she said suddenly, springing up from the bed. 'Come, let's go.'

Umesh winced.

They dressed in silence and went downstairs. The hushed family members watched, silently. It was the first time husband and wife were going out together after the tragedy. Umesh's father had the urge to tell them to take the car, but he kept quiet.

Umesh tried to keep up a chatter of small talk: The weather's nice, isn't it? . . . Where shall we go to buy Nani's sari – Kishanlal's or The Ladies' Emporium? . . . I was to go out on a tour next week, but the boss had the good sense to cancel it, you know . . .

They walked side by side, as if in a ceremonial procession. Even as they weaved their way through a knot of people in the crowded Clock Tower Square, Umesh resolutely clung to his wife's side. He didn't realize how unusual this was of him.

The market. The hurrying throng. The cacophony of buying and selling, the brisk air of commerce, the sweaty odour of enterprise. A hawker shouted beside a pile of cheap red and blue handkerchiefs. A rustic girl picked one up admiringly as her harried mother tried to drag her away. A bird seller dangled an aviary of irate, screeching mynahs. A Sikh boy, his hair tied in a bun on top of his head, was bawling. His nylon-clad, heavily lipsticked mama, who had vanished into some shop, waddled out. In a small, cramped shop two young workers rolled beedis, seemingly absorbed in their work.

An old man at the fruit seller's examined each mango painstakingly to gauge its ripeness.

A peddler advertising a wonder ointment for scabies shoved a leaflet into Nirmala's hand.

They don't know, she sighed, this multitude. They don't know a damn thing about me. They don't know that my only child left me not even a fortnight ago.

She gloated in the secret pride of her private grief. I know what these people, steeped in ignorance and indifference, don't know. Am I not like a God incognito in this crowd? Or maybe I'm just an unredeemed sinner, still at large and on the loose, sullied by the putrid blood of death, who could pollute the whole of humanity with her faintest touch. My, why's that little brat staring at me? Could he have seen me for what I am?

'Not that way, Nimu,' Umesh kept up, keen not to relapse into silence. 'Why are you heading towards the vegetable market? We have to go to the cloth shop, don't you remember? . . . Watch out, there's a garbage heap ahead . . . You must be very tired. Come, let's have a cold drink . . .'

As she waited for the cold drink, Nirmala contemplated her husband's hairy hands and heavy face, and suddenly felt very tired. This fellow's not just a husband, she thought, but a man, a male. His gross, unperceiving maleness, his remorseless male body. God,

how large he looks! And what is it he's so much at pains to convey – that he understands? Does he, huh? How dare he imagine he has plumbed the mysterious depths of my grief? Is it because he had laid his body over mine and fathered my child? Oh God, even this marketplace is no different from the bedroom. Can I ever get rid of this man? Or will he always hover around me? How I would love to fling the drink in his face and run off – run off and get lost in the crowd. At least I could be alone, then. I could laugh, cry, dance, or do anything. Even strip – strip myself of the exteriors and whirl within the recesses of my suffering. And nobody would watch me. Least of all this man here. There would be no one but me. Only me. Me, my sorrow, my son. He would steal softly in, my son, and like an eager little calf press his face against my breasts heavy with milk. That three year old child! Yes, I used to suckle him still. What concern is that of yours? Who are you to decide everything for me?

Nirmala stiffened.

It did not escape Umesh. He felt a stab of panic. One never knew, he thought. She might dissolve into sudden tears, or flare up inexplicably.

Old doctor Gobardhan's words came to mind: 'Listen, young man. Pull yourself together. You can't afford to

give up. You must be a source of strength to Nimu. In times like this women need careful handling.' But why? he wanted to know. Am I not suffering? Am I supposed not to, because I'm a man, a male? Am I not the father of the child who died? Ah, it's easy to preach, damn it.

He felt anger rising in him, but he collected himself quickly. He looked at Nirmala sadly and hoped her black mood would pass.

Once they had finished their drink, they bought the sari and walked back home, enveloped in a funereal silence. Nirmala made up her mind to sleep alone on a bare mattress on the verandah from then on.

That night Umesh tossed and turned on the bed. Why is it so dark outside? he wondered. Where has the moon gone and hidden itself – in some godforsaken corner of the sky? Why is the night so quiet, so still, so devoid of its healing touch? Does the night ever calm the ruffled mind? What comforts the soul? Nothing! The poor damned males are condemned to fend for themselves forever.

His burning eyes ran over the cold lonely flower standing in the flower vase. It had not wilted yet. One must either face one's grief manfully or succumb to it, he sighed. There's perhaps no other way.

He had a sudden urge to hug somebody tightly,

breathlessly. Oh God, my son is dead, he moaned. My wife has forsaken me. She won't even sleep with me. Isn't she mine any longer? Oh, this ghastly, this crippled, fetid old night! My wife sleeps out there on the verandah. Oh, let her. I won't go to her. Damn it, I can't stoop so low. I'm a man, I can't grovel before her, I can't cry out for help!

Yet a few seconds later, he crossed over to the verandah, lay down by her side, unbuttoned her blouse and buried his face between her breasts.

Half asleep, Nirmala stirred and pulled him closer, pressing his eager mouth to her breast. A sharp thrill ran down her spine. My little Biju's come back, she thought. Oh, what a state he's reduced me to, the naughty thing!

She fondled his face. Waves of warmth and dizziness rolled over her. My Biju has grown so much, she smiled. So what? He's still a little child to me – the same face, the same nose, the very same greedy moist lips.

Then she felt the unmistakable stirring of the male body, the slow surge of its desire. Oh God, this is not my child, she woke up. Why, what have I been dreaming of?

'Aren't you ashamed of yourself?' she hissed, recoiling from him in disgust. 'Who the hell asked you to come

here?'

Nirmala looked down from the balcony. The cobbled courtyard was still damp from an early morning shower. Everything is so real, so solid, she smiled bitterly. The house with its high ceilings, the cracks in the boundary wall, the iron vaults, the tall almirahs, the bathtubs, the chipped flowerpots, the pigeon cotes, the new garage, the fresh coat of varnish on the wall, the brand new radiogram   Everything was so solid, so permanent – the strength and pride of the unchanging frieze. But oh, not me. Not my son. We fade, we pale, we die.

How long has he been dead, my son? Ten days or fifteen – how long? A year? I no longer sink into despair nor cry as bitterly as before. Maybe I shall soon learn to giggle again, to play cards and strut about in new saris, to guzzle like a pig and chatter endlessly. Sometimes I shall remember my child. Of course, I will. But then I'll not be so heartbroken. Maybe only the lustrous drop of a tear – my poignant homage to his memory – will glisten in my eyes: Oh, once I had a little child! Oh no! It's not going to be like that. I'm not going to sit and embroider covers for the radiogram, or cook mutton curry. I'm supposed to stitch and cook well – ha! Damn it, I couldn't care less about what other people think.

Just give me a little more time, I beg you. Don't rush me. Have pity on me. Please. I know I'm beginning to forget him – there's a current carrying him down, a breeze blowing him away. Soon I'll forget him completely, oh God!

'Nimu,' her mother-in-law called. 'Nimu!'

There, Nirmala sighed, how her voice drips tenderness. Perhaps the spices have been ground and she's waiting for me to cook the mutton. Or maybe it's time for Father-in-law's sherbet. I don't mind doing the work, but what I can't stand is her stuffing me with sweets. Why does she do that? But then the blame isn't hers alone. Don't I love sweets? Don't I love being fussed over?

'Coming,' Nirmala responded reluctantly. She went down the stairs, almost brushing against the wall.

From the landing, she could see several pairs of shoes on the verandah. A particularly battered brown pair stood out from the rest. A chill ran down her spine. So the wise old heads have gathered for a morning session, she groaned. I know who must be stealing the show – the owner of the battered pair, the family physician and Father-in-law's closest friend to boot – that old fogey Gobardhan.

'Roll some paans for them, will you?' her mother-in-law asked her. 'Two for Batadada. You know what he

likes, don't you? Without lime. Why didn't you have the dessert last night? I told you to so many times!'

Nirmala did not answer. She began to prepare the betel leaves. As fragments of the conversation floated out of the drawing room, she craned her neck and caught a glimpse of the gaunt white-haired profile of the doctor.

'You know, Dasarathi,' the old doctor was saying, with the finality of clinching an issue, 'your doctor, father, mother, grandfather, grandmother and the rest are of little avail when you're up against fate. What are we all worth? Mere straws in the wind.' In a gesture of reverence, he raised his hands heavenward. 'What didn't we do to save that child! While there was the faintest chance, I didn't give up hope. But he was beyond cure, beyond all our mortal efforts. We couldn't have held him back. Do you remember what I told you that evening about a week before his death? . . .'

Which evening? Nirmala tensed. Nobody ever told me anything! Up until the last minute you all led me to hope that my little Biju would pull through. Even on the last day, you, doctor, you patted his head and said, God's there, everything will be all right. Why couldn't you come out with the truth? Why couldn't you say, God is in His heaven, but your child won't survive?

She glared at the doctor's large dome of a head. Biju had never taken to the old goat, she recalled.

'You know what happened to my sister-in-law's daughter?' Batadada began. 'You people ought to have seen that plump little angel. Absolutely healthy that child was, nothing wrong with her. Then one fine morning she complained of a stomachache and the same evening she died . . .'

Oh, my God, what's all this about! Nirmala felt giddy. Has my son been dead so long that these people can talk so unfeelingly? Don't they have any compassion?

More instances and more illustrations of untimely deaths followed. Each vied with the other to recall as many incidents as possible.

Nirmala cocked her ears when she heard the deep voice of her father-in-law.

'My father had an elder brother,' Dasarathi began. 'He died before he was three months old. When my grandma was around, she used to tell us about him. You wouldn't believe how her eyes would instantly well up with tears, as if the boy had died only the night before . . . A mother is a unique creature. She never can forget the child she carries inside her for nine months.'

'True,' chimed in the rest. 'Very true!'

Dasarathi fell silent. Nirmala was relieved. She imagined his broad face twitching in deep understanding of a mother's grief.

'Whatever the Lord does is for the best,' the old doctor

droned. 'Who are we to question His intentions? More often than not what He snatches away with one hand He gives back with the other. If He plucks a fruit before it is ripe, He bestows another in no time. That's the underlying principle of creation. A purely biological necessity. I tell you Nimu will have another child within a year. I say Dasarathi, old boy, cheer up. You will surely behold the face of another grandson. That will make you live for another decade.'

Nirmala froze, gripped by a sudden fear. Why did he speak like that? Wasn't it downright cruel and mean? Did Father-in-law believe in all that rubbish?

Now it was Batadada's turn. Vigorously munching paan, he reeled off yet another story.

They must be enjoying the whole thing, she sighed, these august, venerable judges. They must be smacking their lips while pronouncing their precious, irrefutable verdicts. Creation and biology my foot!

As she walked into the room with the paan-tray, she glanced out of the corner of her eye at them. She knew she was right. Behold, she thought to herself, the mighty Lords sitting atop the celestial Kailash! What am I but a mere dancing girl before them! A nimble dancing girl to provide them with a little distraction!

She was not angry; on the contrary, she felt very small and insignificant. She could sense the mute blessings of

the Lords bestowed upon her. She suddenly felt a child growing inside her as their divine eyes remained riveted on her, and they smiled benignly at her rapidly swelling belly. She flushed. So it's just a matter of one child following another, huh? One fruit after another? Damn you, Lords. Am I a cow, or a tree?

Nirmala did not feel like going back to the kitchen. Excusing herself to her mother-in-law, she walked off. She could feel the old lady's fond gaze. Was she too dreaming of the next fruit? she wondered.

She stopped on the stairs to catch her breath. To whom can I speak? Who'll understand my tangled thoughts?

Dressed for the office, Umesh came down for his meal. Nirmala paused in her tracks. Haven't I been looking for this man? she wondered. Yes, of course, who else? Who else will understand the contours of my mind? Ah, the poor dear looks so pale and haggard. No, I must restore him back to health, and together we shall put up a brave front against the rest. These people, they don't know us yet.

Overwhelmed with love, she took another step towards him.

Umesh looked away.

Nirmala realized he was sulking. It's all my fault, I know. I've spurned him, I've pushed him away. All this while I haven't even bothered to see if he existed. Maybe

he wanted to say something last night. Oh, why did I push him away? Why is he so hurt? Aren't we adrift in the same boat? We're so helpless, the two of us. Why should we resent each other?

She looked up at him with beseeching eyes.

Her unarticulated feelings had not failed to reach him, but he thought he should wait until she was her usual self. She's unhinged, he reminded himself as he shuffled nervously towards her.

They came face to face near the staircase window overlooking the lawn. Then, suddenly, oblivious to the world around her – the sand heap, the chained dog, the labourers – she threw herself on him with outflung arms. 'I can't stand this place any longer,' she burst out, holding him tightly. 'Take me away. Please!'

Umesh was taken aback. Raising her chin, he looked into her eyes. 'What's the matter? What's wrong?'

'Promise me,' she stammered. 'Promise me you'll not want a child again. Give me your word.'

He did not know what to make of this sudden, garbled entreaty. 'But who says I want a child?' he comforted her, lowering his head on her shoulder. 'I don't want anyone but you.'

When she opened her eyes, Nirmala found the congregation dispersing. The old doctor was struggling to open his tattered umbrella.

Watching them, she felt very small again. But now it did not hurt her, this feeling of smallness; on the contrary, there was something lovely about it – as lovely as a bee buzzing or a butterfly flying, or a little red fish splashing.

Early that night they lay in their bed and made love with abandon, their body and mind achieving a rare fusion.

Shortly afterwards she began to feel restless. Did they bury or burn my child? she wondered.

A long unresolved question gnawed at her. What happened to the half-eaten lozenge he'd hidden in his shirt pocket?

She turned to ask her husband, but he was already asleep.

Night Dogs

Stop it, you goddamn dogs. Stop the bloody racket and let a man get a decent sleep. Sital turned on his side, cursing the dogs, his eyes clamped shut.

After a brief interlude the dogs started howling with renewed vigour.

'Whatever made you pick this godforsaken place?' muttered Navina, with a prolonged sigh of irritation. 'Have decent folks ever lived here? Couldn't you have found a flat elsewhere? No, you only thought about the rent. You thought you'd save enough in just six months to buy a radio, a camera and whatever else you wanted! When will you stop thinking like a clerk?'

He was stung to the quick. How could his wife of all people put him down? True, he had started out as a clerk, but wasn't he an accounts officer now? And hadn't he been hand-picked for the head office? Further promotions couldn't be far away: chief accountant, assistant manager, manager . . . Long live Navnirman Industries!

Outside, the howling persisted.

It was so bad that Sital was suddenly afraid his head would split open. Goddamn dogs! What were they up to? What could he think of to take his mind off them? The smoothness of the glasstop table in the office? The succulence of the juicy apples at lunch time, subsidized

by Navnirman Industries? No, there were better things to turn his thoughts to: the soft warm flesh of his wife.

He drifted off to sleep and began to dream. The dogs, now calm, lay at his feet, looking at him, pleading: please tell the memsahib not to be annoyed with us, not to threaten to whip our hides, we promise to behave ourselves. Sital hastened to assuage their injured feelings: you don't know Navina, her words may be harsh but her heart is kind; believe me, she has a heart of gold, she loves her husband, she loves dogs, there's nothing to be afraid of.

When he awoke next morning the first thing he saw was his wife's sullen face, her eyes red from lack of sleep, and he wisely refrained from pleasantries.

'Time I got down to doing something about the dogs,' he said, as he prepared to leave for the office. 'I must.'

He was almost inclined to do something about them immediately, but then he remembered he couldn't afford to reach the office even a minute late. It wasn't simply a question of his reputation; being late could hurt his chances for early promotion. Everyone in the office knew that the accountant would be at his desk at ten, come rain or high water. Only the other day he had been less than five minutes late and the whole office had been thrown into a turmoil. No, a repeat of that and his bosses

would think he was no better than the rest of them, ruining his chances of being promoted ahead of everyone else. The dogs could wait, he'd deal with them later, perhaps on his way back from the office in the evening, after his weekly visit to the local market to buy fish and vegetables. Surely the police station would still be open. But would the police bother about dogs? Dogs, after all, aren't human beings. Maybe he'd have to contact the local council officials, but the only solution they'd have would be to kill the poor creatures. The very idea was repugnant, but he fought off his qualms. Let the council authorities apply the law and do what they had to do.

Down on the road his eyes fell on a mangy bitch. She bore little resemblance to the dogs in his dreams. There was no spark of life in her rheumy eyes; her reddish brown coat was ragged, she was covered in mange. How did she manage to still get about on all fours? Was she the one that had kept wailing so shrilly all last night?

Suddenly a large male dog appeared from somewhere and rushed towards the bitch, brushing past Sital in utter disdain. He began to sniff her hindquarters avidly, but she showed no interest, let alone encouragement. But the male was very persistent.

A typical instance of male tyranny, Sital thought. Men were no different either, with a few honourable

exceptions of course. Such as he himself: he had never forced himself on Navina; he always retreated whenever he found her prickling at his slightest overture. Somehow she hadn't been in the mood to make love for the last month, even before the dogs had begun their nocturnal racket, and he had had to go to sleep with his face to the wall.

Another dog, which looked meaner than a jackal, appeared, and in a moment a routine fight erupted to the accompaniment of lusty battle-cries and barking. But the traffic on the road was getting heavier and the warring group, bitch and all, dragged themselves into a lane.

The significance of the nocturnal howling dawned on Sital. In the daytime the fight was only between males, but at night there could be ten or twenty dogs fighting over one mangy bitch. Angry and irritated, he hurried to catch his bus.

On his way home that evening, he decided against approaching the council authorities, now that he had unraveled the mystery. He could deal with the problem himself. But first a nice cup of tea; then regale Navina with a spicy report on his finding, and think up a little plan to strike at the root of the cause and restore peace and tranquillity. What would it be – chase away the bitch? Adopt it and keep it away from the salivating

male population? Maybe once she was fattened up she'd be able to fend off unwanted attention!

Suddenly he realized the street was empty, and all the shops shuttered. What was wrong? Had the dogs addled his brain? How could the road be empty at seven in the evening? Shadows seemed to flit and play hide-and-seek under the lampposts.

A shadow rushed towards him and metamorphosed itself into a stranger clad in a lungi and a vest.

'Name?' the fellow demanded.

'Sital Das.'

'Congsal or Naxal?'

'What?'

'Don't play dumb.' There followed a prolonged scrutiny of Sital's face. 'How long have you been living here?'

'Hardly a couple of months. I've rented the yellow house by the ration shop.'

'I see.'

'Bhupen Sarkar's the landlord.'

'He's one of us, the old bandicoot. What do you do?'

'I'm a clerk, no, I mean, an accountant in a company.' He didn't add that he was an officer. 'Navnirman Industries.'

'Beware,' the fellow whispered hoarsely before melting into the darkness. 'There'll be a Congsal attack tonight.'

A shiver ran down Sital's spine, and he hastened his steps. As someone well aware of the political scenario of the city – he wasn't naive – he knew the area was crawling with Naxals. They were lord and master there – of everyone, beginning with the inhabitants, right down to the dogs, the police and the paanwallahs. All one needed to do was to pay the protection money – 'a donation' was what they called it – on time. Even then the rent for the house worked out very cheap. But who were the Congsals? Rival goons? What did they want – to take over the territory? Would they be as ruthless as the Naxals? Would there be a big, a very big fight? With bombs and all? But bombs were a different ballgame: not anybody and everybody could use bombs, just as not every commerce graduate could aspire to become an accountant with Navnirman Industries. You needed experience, lots of it; you needed intelligence. The Congsals had a long way to go. Sital wondered whether Navina would understand it all. He remembered telling her something once, just after they'd moved into the house. Pointing to the luxuriant nature surrounding them – the green carpet of the paddy fields, the trees, the foliage – with an expansive sweep of his arms, he had asked whether she could have ever dreamt of such gifts of nature in places like Bhawanipore or Kalighat or Chowringhee. Could she have hoped to hear bird songs

in the morning? Navina's response had been icy cold: 'The nature you're being so eloquent about doesn't bode well. I'm sure something untoward will soon take place and show you up for the prize fool you are!'

Better not to bring the topic up again, Sital decided. Better to talk about the dogs, about two dogs and a bitch. And make it a little funny, a little bawdy, with just the right amount of levity. Anything to get a few good laughs.

Maybe the matter would have ended happily and Navina would have fallen in love with the nature around her had the dogs not started howling at night barely fifteen days after they moved in. Stupid dogs! Sital felt a rising wave of annoyance. Why create such an unholy racket? Why not go about the damn business as quietly as everybody else? No need to prove how dogged they could be. So now if they faced extermination they couldn't blame it on anyone else, could they?

He found Navina in bed reading a novel. She rolled on to her stomach when she saw him, sending the paperback flying, and fixed him with a poisonous stare. 'So?' The words, cold, menacing, dropped slowly from her lips. 'Did you have the damned dogs killed?'

'Have them killed? Why?' He wanted to add that there was no need to kill them, that there was a much better alternative, that they and the dogs could peacefully

coexist. He wanted to tell her what he had seen in the morning on the way to the office. He looked at her and wished he hadn't been so short.

His wife's face remained hard, her lips curled in contempt: she knew his competence, or rather his sad lack of it.

Sital wanted to fight. She was his wife, after all, and had no business feeling like that.

He moved closer and put his arm around her. 'You know something,' he said with a chortle that sounded hollow even to himself. 'I found out why the dogs howl at night. It's all over a bitch, a wretched little bitch that's more dead than alive. I saw her this morning on my way to the office. The poor thing was dragging herself around when a big beefy male descended on her and tried to . . . well, you-know-what. Then along came another big boy and there it was, a roaring fight . . .'

The lights suddenly went out and the house plunged into darkness. Sital stopped. The power failure came as no surprise and he hoped the lights would come back on soon. Suddenly he was assailed by fears. Didn't the howling of the dogs that evening have an ominous ring to it? Hadn't the street emptied long before nightfall? And now the streetlights had been robbed of their wan smiles. Were the Congsals coming tonight?

Navina got off the bed to find a matchbox to light a candle, but he warned her not to.

'Don't.'

'Why?'

What could he explain? Tell her what the strange fellow had whispered into his ears? The whole thing was so outlandish. Tell her that even a single lighted candle might give them away?

There was a loud thumping on the door. Although his heart began to thud violently, he hurried to answer. He couldn't leave it to Navina.

His delay produced a volley of staccato knocks. Sital opened it a crack and stood back.

'Sital Das,' somebody said in a harsh, grating whisper. 'Listen carefully. Tonight it will remain dark. Don't open your door to anyone except us. Our signal will go like this: taptap . . . tap . . . taptap. Don't forget. Good night.'

'Good night.' Sital couldn't make out the speaker's face. Was it the same fellow he had met in the street? Was he trying to frighten them both? Why all this mystery? Why?

The night was pitch black. Husband and wife were silent, asking each other no questions, seeking no answers. The candle was not lit. They groped around and found some slices of bread which they washed down with glasses of water. Then they groped their way to

the bed and lay down.

Sital was too agitated to fall asleep. Taptap. . . tap . . . that's how their signal would go. But what if the other group, the Congsals, turned up? What would they do – bash down the door?

Nobody came, and the night seemed as if it would pass without incident. For a long time he was tormented by shrill, disconnected yelps and howls. Somebody seemed to scream unnaturally. Somebody else seemed to be panting horribly. Who was wailing – a man, or a dog? Was somebody kicking the walls?

Although their bodies touched, he made no attempt to hold Navina. As the man and the husband it was his job to comfort her: now listen, the situation might be grim, but certainly not out of control. But sometimes body language is more eloquent than a thousand words. He suddenly wanted to nestle against her, to deny the formless darkness, the inchoate fear. He laid a tentative arm across her breasts. 'Don't be scared,' he whispered. 'Nothing will happen to us.'

Navina did not push his hand away. 'Of course nothing will happen,' she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. 'We belong to that blessed tribe of animals which, when confronted with a tiger, stand rooted to the ground and stare fascinated into it's bloodthirsty mouth. We don't turn tail and run away, we aren't cowardly lambs. But

we also don't have the courage to fight the tiger, mind you. We only stand and stare, admiring our adversary: What a majestic beast! Such sweet ruby-red lips! Will it devour me?' She gave a derisive chuckle. 'No, it won't gobble me up, will it? Doesn't it know that I'm an innocent soul, that I stay out of politics, class warfare, ideological battles, that I'm happy with my office and my wife? Perhaps it knows that I'm worse than that mangy bitch in the street.'

Navina's loud and hearty laughter made Sital shudder. She could be heard clearly outside.

'Don't be scared.' Obviously she hadn't finished. 'Nothing will happen to us. Nobody will gobble us up. What would make us appetising? Nothing! We're only objects, like a blanket or a bowl or something they need. They won't leave us alone, because we're the ones they have to intimidate to show off, to play their manly games. See what I mean? They won't kill us, they'll only take mouthfuls of our flesh now and then. And we should consider ourselves damn lucky they've decided to do so. Do you understand?'

He was in a daze. What had come over Navina? Had she gone mad? Why was she being so bitchy, so nasty? What did she want him to do – join either the Naxals or the Congsals? Or leave? To go where? Was there any guarantee the same thing wouldn't happen somewhere

else? Was any part of Calcutta safe any longer? Or for that matter any part of any big city in India? Calcutta today, Delhi, Bombay, Nagpur and others tomorrow. So where could one go? Where could a respectable young accountant and his beautiful young wife go? Was there no place for them? No respect for them?

Damn it, he thought to himself. Why get worked up over nothing? Navina was all bark and no bite. He shouldn't get upset; the crisis would blow over in next to no time. The Congsals would go away and so would the Naxals, the dogs would stop howling, and there'd be peace and tranquillity all around.

As was to be expected, soon after her outburst, Navina drew him close to her and put her arms around him. 'I'm not blaming you. You and I are in the same boat – we belong together, to the same class, to the same group. Or else I wouldn't have married you, would I have?'

Sital was overjoyed. What did her harsh words matter? Her warm embrace was worth more than a million rupees. In the afternoon, he recollected, the assistant manager had come and laid a friendly hand on his shoulder, and now Navina was embracing him, perhaps even desiring him.

His breath quickened; he felt the unmistakable surge of desire rising in him. Maybe . . . maybe after all these

days in the new place . . . after all these dog days . . . in the errie darkness of the night . . . punctuated by the commas and semicolons of wails and groans . . . perhaps theý'd come together and become one . . .

Over the next week, Sital made friends with many of his neighbours. They all returned his smile, some even went out of their way to speak to him – all those who had never spoken a word even while standing next to him in the bus queue or had pushed him aside in the fish market, trying to buy the choicest piece. He picked up snippets of crucial information from them all:

'Did you see how quietly they did away with the old headmaster, Avinash? Who knows when our turn will come!'

'This time the Congsals will take over. They'll liquidate the Naxals.'

'We were better off without the Congsals. Where did they come from? Do you intend to stay on here or move someplace else?'

Fear. Naked fear. The fear of the respectable middle class. The fear of the people who work in offices, shops and businesses, who belong neither to the Congsals nor to the Naxals, who realize that the protection offered by either doesn't amount to much.

'So what are we to do, sir? Any idea? Share your ideas

with us, won't you? You're one of us.'

Sital had never felt better. He read the papers, followed the political trends and made suitable remarks and comments. Sometimes he invited a neighbour for a cup of tea to finish the discussion they had started in the bus. Navina had no objection. The strange outburst seemed to have taken everything out of her, and these days she passed out the moment she hit the bed. To one neighbour he said: 'Ramadhan Babu, I couldn't agree with you more. You're absolutely right. But the power of youth should be harnessed for better purposes. We need a long-term solution to the problem . . .' To another: 'What! They slashed Priyanath Babu's son? That brilliant sportsman? Oh, my god!' To yet another: 'Aha, Ranjan Babu. Come and have a cup of tea at my place, sir. As I was saying, a balance has to be struck between individualism and socialism. Or else violence will become endemic . . . What, the final confrontation between Naxals and Congsals is slated for this Wednesday? Your son heard it through the police grapevine? This Wednesday, huh? Good!' Once it was all over he and Navina could go for evening walks, maybe take in a movie or two, or eat out. The night dogs could be easily taken care of. Whether they barked or not, whether Navina slept soundly or not, once he had promised to take care of the dogs, he'd take care of them;

they were his responsibility. And to someone else: 'I hear our local confectioner has joined the Congsals and is now busy manufacturing bombs instead of rasogollas. Is that true? . . . What's the hurry? It's not dark yet. Have another rasogolla. I got it from a very good shop near the office . . .'

A change had come over him. He had become voluble, easily excited. He laughed a lot, and uproariously too. His voice was unnaturally loud. He slept less. But he put it all down to the price to be paid for a unique, newfound euphoric state.

Ranjan Babu's predictions came true. The stray acts of violence, conspiracies and secret parlays of the past fortnight culminated in an open, earnest, no-holds-barred fight on a Wednesday night. It was the full moon night of Kartik. Like the stains on the moon, shadows poured out from every nook and cranny into the streets, alleys and lanes and flitted about, hitting at each other. It was difficult to say whether the police intervened because of the fights or whether it all erupted because of the police crackdown. It was a regular three-way battle and led to many untimely deaths. Bombs exploded, bullets whistled by, houses caught fire, cries arose.

All night Sital sat on his bed, his eyes shut. Let it rage on, he thought, let it. Let it be the end. Let things be

resolved by tomorrow morning. Naxals and Congsals, let them all perish. I belong to no camp. Did someone bang on the door? Whoever it is, the police will find out that I don't belong to any camp. What was that sound again? Did a bullet hit our wall? Navina my dear, where are you? Come and sit beside me. I can't get up. I wouldn't, even if I could. If I did I'd have to stand up; once I stood up, I'd have to walk to the window; if I reached the window, I'd have to open it and look out; and in the bright moonlight I'd simply give myself away. They'd take one look at me and wonder: which group does this chap belong to, Congsals or Naxals; what 'ism' does he subscribe to, socialism or individualism; what does he hold dear, labour or capital? Was that somebody banging on the door? Go on, Navina, open the door, there's nothing to fear . . . Who's come, Rajani Babu's son? What, he's got a broken leg and is bleeding profusely? Well, what can we do about it? Who made him become a police stoolpigeon? . . . What, it's the police? All right. Well, my name is Sital Das. I'm the accounts officer in Navnirman Indusries. No, I don't know this fellow lying here from Adam. If you want him, drag him away by all means; if you don't want him, do me a favour and dump him elsewhere. Finish him off. Yes, go ahead, bump him off if he's still alive and be done with it. For God's sake, end it all . . .

*

The dawn came. The war ended. Peace returned. Sital opened his eyes. He didn't want to know who was dead, or how many.

'I can see some dead dogs down below, caught in the crossfire,' Navina announced from the window with the pride of the victorious. 'I hope the mongrel bitch is among them.'

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Raut Roy's stories reveal a profound concern with human suffering . . . his cold-eyed realism is tempered with a deep compassion.

– Jatindra Nayak

Manoj Das: Stories

I imagine Orissa is far from Malgudi, but there is the same quality in his stories with perhaps added mystery.

— Graham Greene

Manoj Das, like Graham Greene and R K Narayan, is a deft spinner of yarns.

— Vijay Tendulkar

Despite the ambience of fantasy, a hard core of realistic predicaments and problems underlines his stories.

— The Straits Times

His world has the fullness of human psyche, with its dreams, fantasies, its awe and wonder

– A. Russell

Manoj Das's stories compel the most blasé contemporary reader to return for a brief trip to a lost literary wonderland.

— The Statesman

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– *Kishori Charan Das*

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–*Kishori Charan Das*

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One of the few contemporary writers, who appears to be entirely amoral with his observations on life, which are muted most of the time, and does not feel obliged to make a value judgement. Suave and witty, his stories... dispense with the conventional resolution.

– *Kishori Charan Das*

The surprise angle that he envisages makes the stories acquire an almost Hemingway-like quality of craftsmanship.

– *Financial Express*

His stories are about 'divides', about gaps between realities and imagination. In complex shifts between direct dialogue, interior monologue, and interior or imagined dialogue, Das lovingly but mercilessly exposes his characters' thoughts, their self-deceptions, and the games they play with each other. The stories are about human weaknesses, the fallibility of human relationships, and the strategies we adopt to cope with our failures. They are also about coming to terms with unpleasant, sometimes shocking truths about ourselves and others.

Complex stories that leave us wondering about them long after we have read them and that avoid any simple resolution.

– Phyllis Granoff

The sensitivity, subterranean and introspective, culled from real life goings-on . . . concerns the middle class with its eye on rapid upward social mobility, an effort which by itself throws up its own dialectic.

– Sudhansu Mohanty

Apparently uneventful narratives lead up to moments of epiphany.

– Jatindra Nayak

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